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ABSTRACT

This report compares the first and second years of a 4-year study on changes in patterns of social behavior and conceptions of 8-12 year-old children following the introduction of television in their community. Three towns of similar composition were selected for their naturally occuring differences in quantity and duration of experience with television. At the beginning of this study, the "High-TV" town had had five years' experience with two channels, the "Low-TV" town had had one year's experience with only one channel, and the "No-TV" town did not receive a television signal. During the second year of the study, the "No-TV" (now "New-TV") town began receiving the public channel. In the first year of the study, comparisons of the "No-TV" and "Low-TV" children demonstrated a clear decrease in radio listening, reading, listening to records, attending movies, playing sports, engaging in outdoor activities, and participating in clubs and parties when television was available. However, it is suggested that these decreases may reflect the novelty of television in the "Low-TV" town, because the children in the "High-TV" town manifested higher levels of involvement in these activities than their peers in the "Low-TV" town. This novelty effect was further supported by the results from the second year of the study: children in the former "No-TV," now "New-TV," town manifested the lowest level of participation in various activities and use of alternative media. (Author/SS)

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THE IMPACT OF THE INTRODUCTION AND DIFFUSION OF TELEVISION ON CHILDREN LIVING IN THREE AUSTRALIAN TOWNS

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EFFECTOS DE LA INTRODUCCION Y LA DIFUSION DE LA TELEVISION SOBRE NIÑOS DE TRES LOCALIDADES AUSTRALIANAS

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Resumen
(abstract)

El papel que juega la televisión en las vidas de los niños fue el objeto de una investigación, de cuatro años de duración, con familias de tres poblaciones de diferentes experiencias en lo que se refiere a la televisión. Las tres localidades escogidas para este estudio eran similares en cuanto al tamaño de la población, tipo de vivienda, composición étnica y nivel socioeconómico. Pero, por otra parte, los tres poblados diferían en cuanto a la cantidad y la duración de su experiencia con la televisión. Al iniciarse la investigación, el poblado llamado Alta TV contaba con cinco años de experiencia y dos canales de televisión (uno de ellos público, subsidiado por el gobierno; el otro, un canal comercial). El poblado denominado Baja TV contaba entonces con un año de experiencia y un único canal (el canal público). El poblado Sin TV no recibía señal de televisión alguna. Durante el segundo año del estudio, la localidad Sin TV (ahora llamada Nueva TV) comenzó a recibir a su vez el canal público.

El presente reporte se basa en comparaciones entre el primero y el segundo año de la investigación, en cuanto a los cambios en los patrones de comportamiento social - de niños de 8 a 12 años de edad - posteriores a la introducción de la televisión.

La disponibilidad de la televisión se relacionó con profundas diferencias en el uso de otros medios de comunicación por los niños, así como en su participación en una amplia gama de actividades sociales. Durante el primer año del estudio, las comparaciones entre los niños de las poblaciones Sin TV y Baja TV mostraron un claro decrecimiento en el uso del radio, discos, lectura, asistencia al cine, participación en eventos deportivos, actividades fuera del hogar y reuniones de tipo social (clubs y fiestas) cuando disponían de la televisión. Sin embargo, cabe sugerir que dichos decrecimientos tal vez sean el reflejo de la novedad de la televisión en el poblado Baja TV, ya que los niños con Alta TV manifestaron niveles superiores de participación en el mismo tipo de actividades. El efecto de novedad fue asimismo reforzado por los resultados correspondientes al segundo año del estudio. En este caso, los niños de la localidad antes Sin TV, ahora llamada Nueva TV, manifestaron los niveles más bajos de participación en diversos tipos de actividad social y de uso de medios alternativos de comunicación.

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Abstract

The role that television plays in children's lives was explored in a four-year study of families living in three communities with differing experience with television. The three towns selected for study were similar in population size, housing, ethnic composition, and socioeconomic level. However, the three towns differed in the quantity and duration of their experience with television. At the beginning of this study, the High-TV town had had five years' experience with two channels (one public, government supported channel and one commercial channel). The Low-TV town had had one year's experience with only one channel (the public channel). The No-TV town did not receive a television signal. During the second year of the study, the No-TV (now New-TV) town began receiving the public channel.

This report is focused upon comparisons of the first and second years of the study in terms of the changes in patterns of social behavior of 8 to 12 year old children following the introduction of television.

The availability of television was associated with marked differences in children's use of alternative media and their involvement in a wide range of social activities. In the first year of the study, comparisons of the No-TV and Low-TV children demonstrated a clear decrease in radio listening, reading, listening to records, movie attendance, playing sports, engaging in outdoor activities, and involvement in clubs and parties when television was available. However, there was some suggestion that these decreases may reflect the novelty of television in the Low-TV town because the children in the High-TV manifested higher levels of involvement in these activities than their peers in the Low-TV town. This novelty effect was further supported by the results from the second year of the study. In this instance, it was the children in the former No-TV, now New-TV town, who manifested the lowest level of participation in various social activities and use of alternative media.

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The role that television plays in the lives of families with young children was explored in a natural experiment in which one town was studied before and after the introduction of television and compared with two comparable towns having differing television experiences.

All three towns were similar in population size (about 2000 to 3000), housing conditions, socioeconomic level, ethnicity European and Aboriginal), and family size distribution (about three children per family). However, the three towns differed in their experiences with television. At Time 1, the High-TV town had had five years' experience with two television channels (both a public, government operated channel and a commercial channel); the Low-TV town had had experience with only one channel for only one year (the public channel); the No-TV Town did not receive a television signal. At Time 2, approximately 13 months later, the former No-TV town had had television for about 11 months and they were receiving only the public channel.

In each town, we were interested in interviewing families with children 12 years or younger. We obtained a list of families from the electoral rolls, town canvassing, school enrolments and hospital birth records. In the first year we attempted to interview about half of all eligible families (about 300 across the three towns). In each family we tried to interview both parents and one child between the ages of 8 and 12 years (about 130 in three towns). In the second year of the study, we expanded our efforts to include all children between the ages of 5 and 12 years (about 1300) and most of their parents (about 1000).

The findings that we would like to describe in this report will be focused upon the 8 to 12 year olds but in order to provide some context and contrasts, we will refer to the parents and younger siblings of these children. In order to understand the mosaic of television's influence, we explored the life-styles of these children and parents in terms of their participation in a variety of leisure activities, perception and understanding of the functions of television and other media, evaluation of television, and structural changes in the communities in which these families lived. In later interviews, we assessed the child's perception of the seriousness of crime and the structure of occupational roles, as well as younger children's conception of "baddies."

The life styles of these children and their parents can be gauged by examining the extent to which they are

involved in various social activities ranging from visiting friends, attending sporting events, reading or pursuing hobbies. The information presented in Figure 1 describes children and parents involvement in four groupings of activities Social Engagement (e.g., visiting friends, attending sporting events, going to parties, involvement in clubs, etc.); Time Filling (e.g., siting around doing nothing, driving around); Individual Interests (e.g., taking care of pets and hobbies); and Alternative Media (reading, listening to records and tapes, going to the movies and theatre, and listening to the radio, etc.). Multivariate analyses of variance, conducted separately for children and their parents indicated that the life-styles in these three towns could be differentiated in terms of the patterns of involvement in 17 activities.

The influence of television on the life styles of children and their parents can be inferred from a comparison of the No-TV town with the two television towns. It can be noted in Figure 1 that, at Time 1, there were relatively higher levels of involvement in Social Engagement and Alternative Media activities in the No-TV town than in either the Low-TV or High-TV towns. There are some marked differences in the patterns obtained for parents and children but one consistency across the family members is the finding that there are the lowest levels of involvement in these activities in the Low-TV town rather than the High-TV town. This was puzzling because we anticipated that television's impact on these activities should be a linear relation--the greater the amount of television available and the longer the duration

of experience, the greater the effect. However, at Time 1, we found a curvilinear relationship which suggested a possible novelty effect with the greatest decrements found in the town with the most recent experience with television (the Low-TV town). Moreover, this pattern was replicated for children and their mothers and fathers (of course although independently generated, there is some correlation based upon family relationship).

Given the curvilinear relationship between television and social activities at Time 1, we were intrigued by the results when we returned at Time 2, approximately one year after the former No-TV town had begun to receive television. The information presented in Figure 2 sets out the pattern of daily activities for 8 to 12 year olds in the three towns before television and again following the introduction of television at Time 2. This cross-sectional analysis indicates that in the Post-TV phase, the town with the lowest level of Social Engagement activities and use of Alternative Media is the New-TV town. Relatively similar patterns were observed in the pre- to post- contrasts in children matched for age and socioeconomic status.

The individual activities that are most affected by television are those associated with the use of alternative media. Thus, attending the movies, listening to radio or records and tapes, as well as reading all manifest declines when television is available as a competing medium. With regard to the latter activity, reading, the mainstay of this

effect seems to be due to the sharp decline in the reading of comics because the reading of books tends to be less of a discretionary activity in the Australian school system.

The changes in the life-styles of individuals are mirrored in the changes in the social organization of the communities in which these families lived. Some of the information on these changes in the communities is anecdotal while other data can be found in public records. For example, the number and scheduling of various social events has been altered by the advent of television in each of these towns. Thus, a parent and teacher group shifted its monthly meeting night to another evening because it conflicted with a popular television series. Similarly, the number of dances and entertainment events scheduled in two clubs in one of the towns has steadilly decreased since the advent of television. Club officials note that it is increasingly difficult to find enthusiastic volunteers to organize special events. In addition, examination of the records for the one cinema in each of the towns allows one to accurately date the onsed of television by the immediate decline in boxoffice receipts. Indeed, several years after the introduction of television in the High-TV town, the only cinema closed. However, judging from reported patterns of increasing movie attendance, the closing may have been premature. Indeed, shortly after the closing, a parent group opened a weekend cinema in a local hall. Ostensibly, the new cinema was designed for the adolescents but it is reportedly well patronized by the adults in the High-TV community.

Perhaps, there is some adjustment in the media mix following extended experience with a new medium such as an initial major displacement followed by some accommodation of the new and old media.

Despite this potential accommodation of the new medium of television, there is extensive experimental evidence that television viewing can not only modify patterns of social interaction but can also profoundly shape one's conception of the world. To examine the latter issue, we returned to the towns after all three had had some experience with television and questioned the 8 to 12 year old children about, among other things, their conception of the structure of crime and the similarities and differences among various occupational roles. One potential hypothesis was that the extent of exposure to television in both duration and diversity, ranging from the High-TV to the New-TV towns, should be related to the differentiation of one's conception of the worlds of crime and work. Moreover, since the High-TV town was the only one exposed to commercial television, and commercial television contained more programmes depicting police, spies and private eyes involved in law and disorder, we reasoned that the children in the High-TV town should have a more differentiated conception of crime and punishment.

To test these various hypotheses, we presented children with a selection of seven illegal activities (spying, murder, drunkenness, assault, kidnapping, bank robbery and shoplifting). The items were presented in pairs and repeated so that each item was paired with every other item. For each pair, the

child was asked to rate the similarity of these two crimes on a five point scale from very much alike to not at all alike. Thus, the child was presented with the pair drunkenness and bank robbery, kidnapping and drunkenness, murder and kidnapping. etc., and asked to rate the similarity of these crimes. We followed a similar procedure in order to evaluate the structure of the world of work by presenting a selection of seven occupations (teacher, nurse, newsreader, sales clerk, TV star, Detective and me) paired in all combinations and rated in terms of similarity. The children found the task to be easy and fun--much more so than their parents. Thus, from this rather simple procedure, we were able to use multidimensional scaling analysis to extract the children's structure of criminal activity and occupational roles.

The information presented in Figure 3 describes the mutidimansional plots of children's conception of crime in the three towns. It can be noted in Figure 3a and 3b that the children in both the New-TV town and Low-TV town produce a straightforward two-dimensional structure of crime. The two dimensions appear to be the degree of seriousness and a property vs person dimension. However, the children in the High-TV town (Figure 3c and 3d) produce a much more differentiated conception of crime consisting of three dimensions. The first two dimensions are similar to the other two towns, namely, seriousness and property vs. person. However, in the High-TV town these two dimensions are overlaid by a third dimension which is not clearly defined. It is possible that this third dimension is in some way

related to the frequency of occurrence in real-life and on television. The possibility that this dimension is a melange of the real and televised worlds is suggested by the ordering of drunkenness, spying and shoplifting. Nevertheless, it is clear that the children in the High-TV town have a much more differentiated conception of the world of crime than their peers in the New-TV or Low-TV towns.

This expanded view of the world of crime in the High-TV town contrasts sharply with these children's understanding of the world of work. When asked about the similarity of the various occupations, it is the children in the New-TV town who produce the most complex three dimensional conception of occupational roles while those with greater experience with television produce occupational structures that are more conventionally described along the lines of sex-role types in a two-dimensional frame.

Thus, it would appear that one possible aspect of extended exposure to television is an expanded horizon for criminal activity and a more constricted view of the world of legal gainful employment.

FIGURE 1

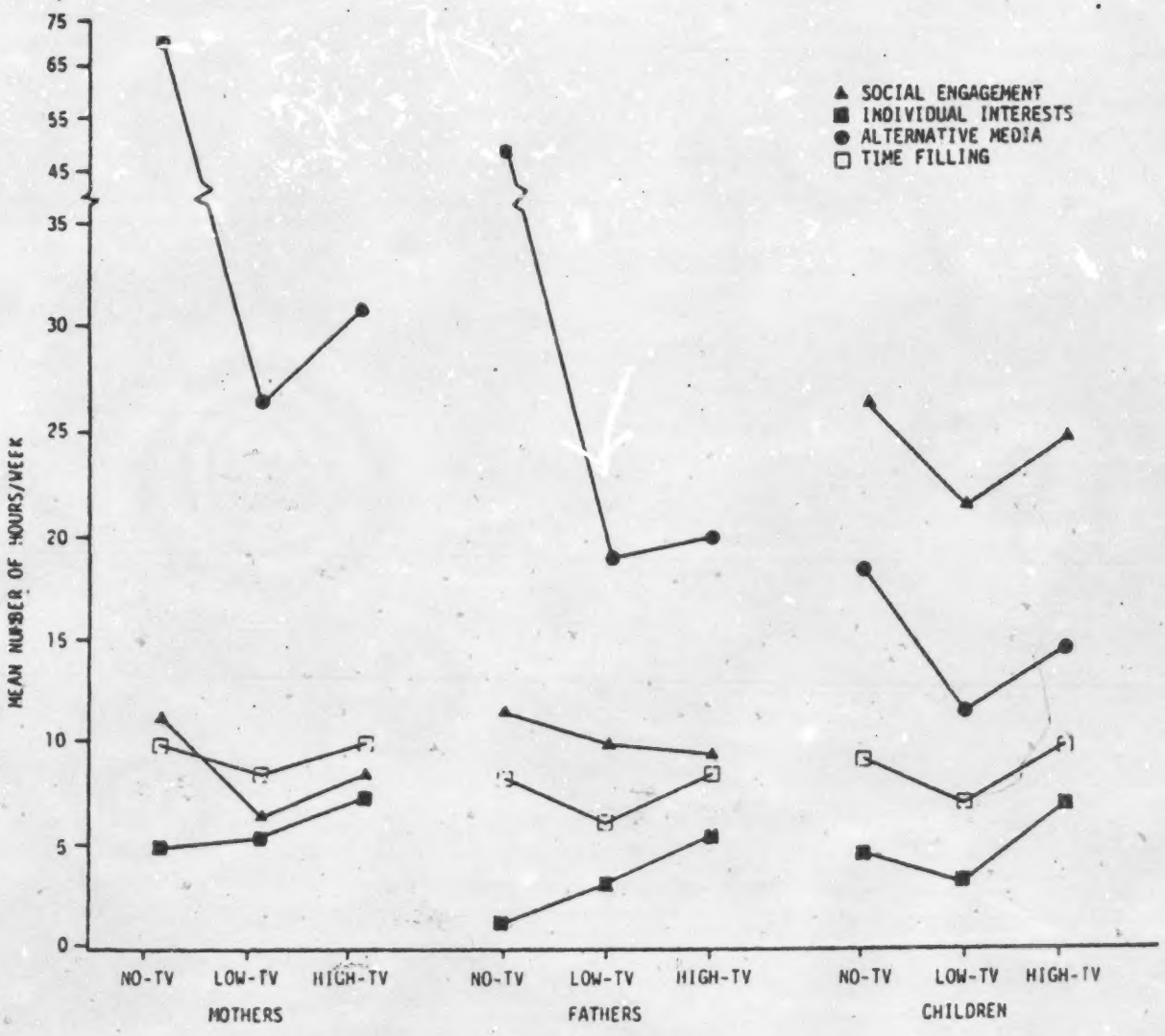

75
65
55
45
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
MEAN NUMBER OF HOURS/WEEK
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA
TIME FILLING
NO-TV
LOW-TV
HIGH-TV
MOTHERS
FATHERS
CHILDREN

FIGURE 2

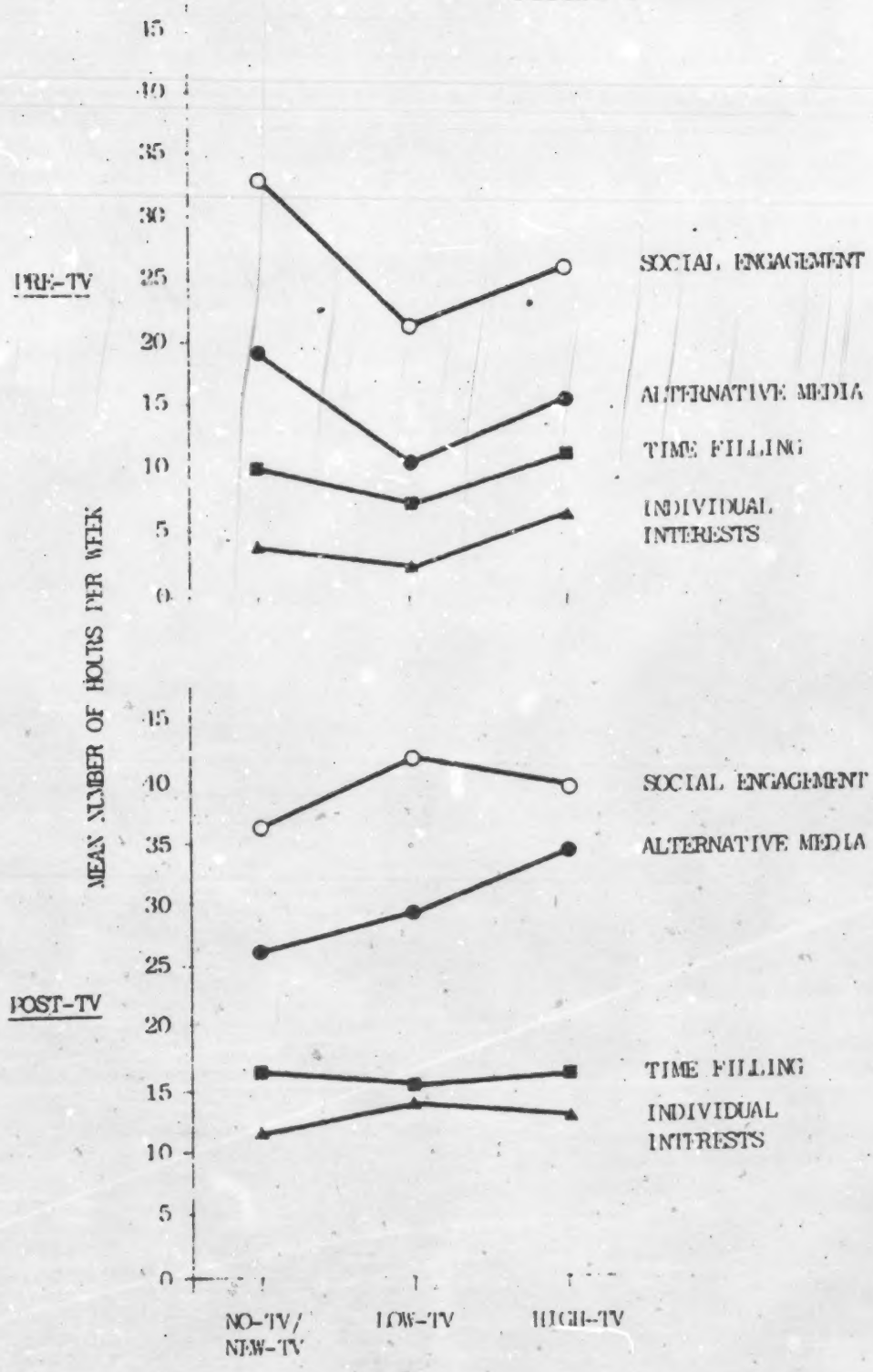
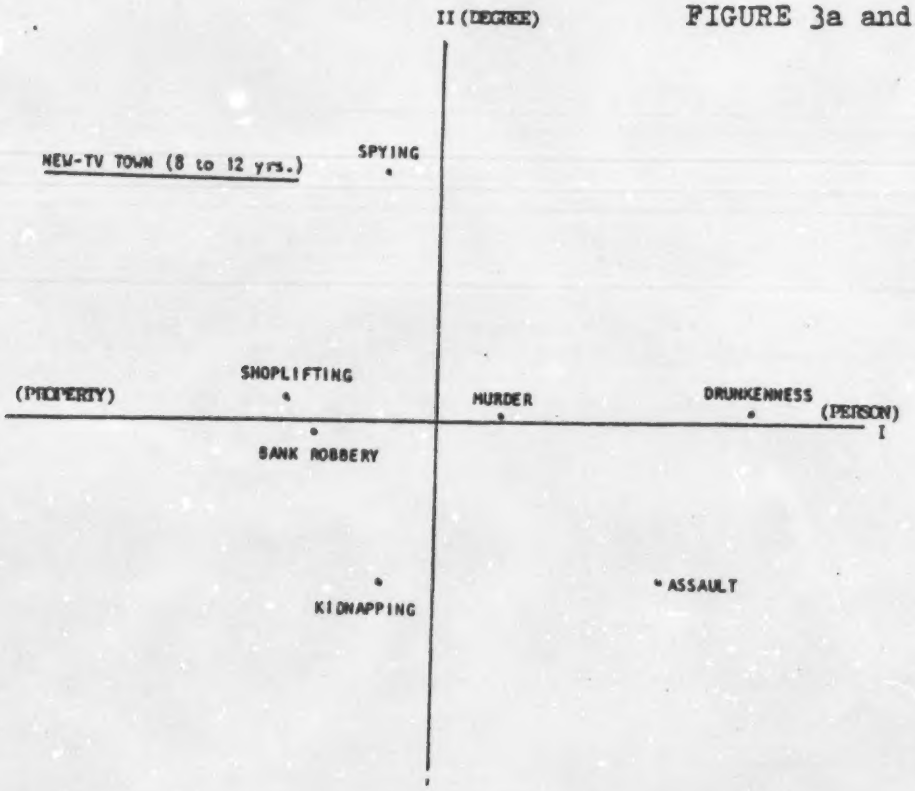

PRE-TV
POST-TV
MEAN NUMBER OF HOURS PER WEEK
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA
TIME FILLING
INDIVIDUAL INTERESTS
NO-TV/ NEW-TV
LOW-TV
HIGH-TV

FIGURE 3a and 3b



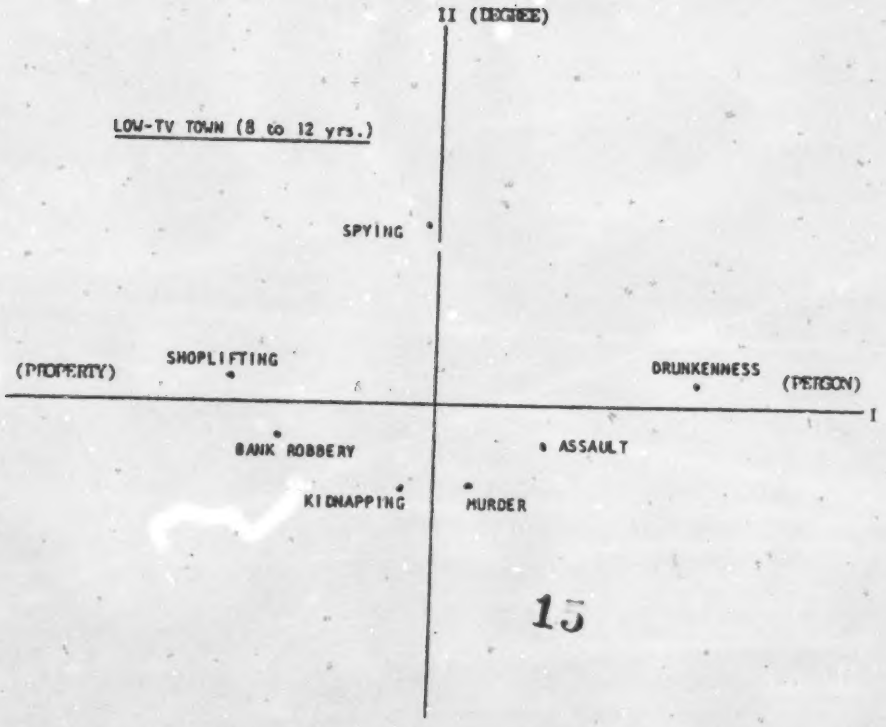
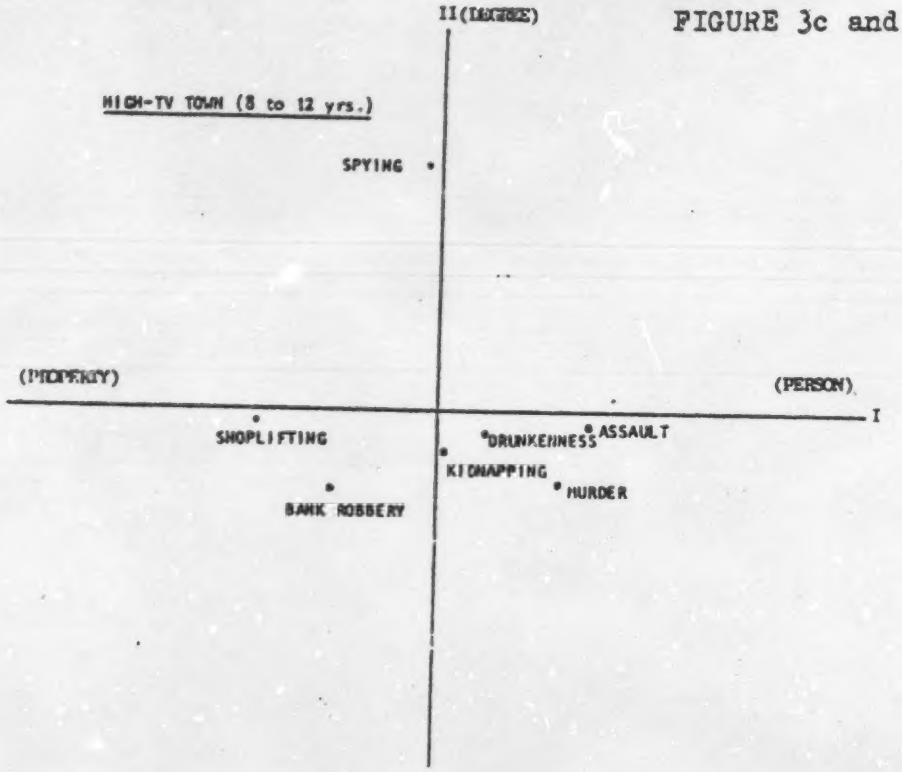
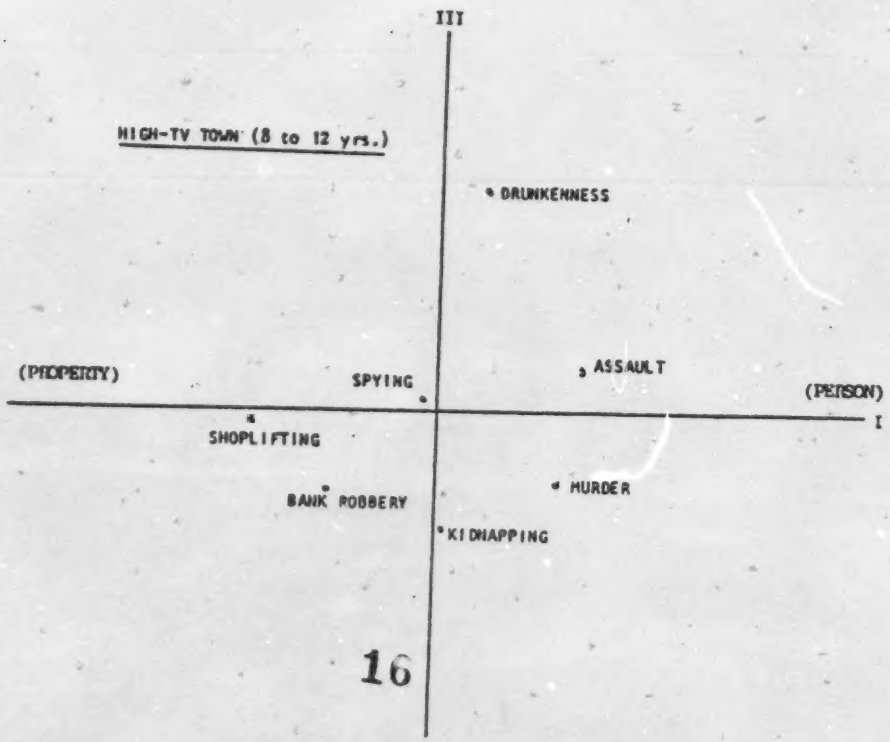


FIGURE 3c and 3d





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